

## A Business Coalition Reprised

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Montgomery County business leaders, who played a key role in helping elect the current Democratic majority on the Montgomery County Council in 2002, are gearing up to enter the fray again this year.

Richard Parsons, president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, says the business community and other organizations are trying to form a coalition to highlight issues in the races for county executive and council.

"There is an effort to put together some type of coalition structure so we can move forward on transportation and quality-of-life issues," Parsons said. "It will be an issues campaign to help educate voters on where candidates stand on those issues."

Specifically, Parsons said, the business community wants to be sure candidates support the proposed Purple Line extension of Metro, which would link Silver Spring and Bethesda. Parsons said the organization would also promote construction of the Corridor Cities Transitway, a proposed light rail or rapid busway that would run along Interstate 270.

Parsons said he is not sure which organizations or business groups would make up the coalition or how it would structure its political operation.

But skeptics suspect the coalition will be a front for developers and real estate agents who want to make sure so-called slow-growth candidates do not win this year.

"It's another arm of the development industry to keep up the fast pace of hyper growth we see in the county," said Drew Powell, executive director of Neighbors for a Better Montgomery, which tracks campaign contributions related to development. "That is what puts the money in the bank for those folks."

In 2002, the Chamber of Commerce, developers and the real estate industry formed Citizens for Quality Living, which raised more than \$100,000 to help candidates who supported building the inter-county connector.

Citizens for Quality Living supported County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's \$1 billion "Go Montgomery" plan to build more roads. The group also appeared to help

several members of Duncan's "End Gridlock" slate of Democratic council candidates, all of whom supported the ICC.

The group spent \$15,000 on a television ad and tens of thousands more on mailings that targeted council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) and candidate Duchy Trachtenberg, all of whom opposed the ICC.

Andrews and Perez won their races anyway, but the business community scored a major victory in 2002 because five members of the End Gridlock slate — Steven A. Silverman (D), Nancy Floreen (D), Mike Subin (D), George Leventhal (D) and Mike Knapp (D) — won.

Andrews, Perez and Trachtenberg were sharply critical of the group's tactics. They filed suit alleging the organization violated campaign finance laws by not filing timely campaign finance reports.

A three-judge panel dismissed the suit, ruling the coalition was an issues-advocacy organization rather than a political entity because its literature never used such words as "support," "vote for" or "oppose" in reference to the council races.

The coalition unveiled its contributors after the primary when it filed with the IRS. According to those tax records, the group's biggest donations were \$55,000 from the National Association of Realtors, \$32,500 from the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce,

\$10,000 from Southern Management Corp. of Vienna and \$7,500 from the Apartment and Office Building Association.

"It was a front group for development interests," Andrews said.

Parsons counters that plenty of interest groups, including labor and environmental organizations, work to make sure voters know where candidates stand on the issues.

"It's part of democracy," Parsons said.

### Prosecutor Seeks House Seat

There's a new name to add to the shifting political chairs at the Montgomery County state's attorney's office.

Bethesda's top prosecutor, Thomas M. DeGonia (D), is running for the Maryland House of Delegates for District 19.

DeGonia, 35, of Olney, has been a prosecutor for roughly seven years.

He said a seat in Annapolis would allow him to "make a difference on a larger scale," on issues such as gang violence, sexual crimes and narcotics, in a political arena where defense lawyers heavily outnumber former prosecutors.

District 19 has two open seats and one incumbent.

His boss, State's Attorney Douglas F. Gansler (D), has all but announced his candidacy for state attorney general. Deputy State's Attorney John McCarthy (D) is expected to run for Gansler's current job.